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## NEW CZECHOSLOVAK LEADER CONSOLIDATES POSITION

In less than a month, Czechoslovak party First Secretary Dubcek has taken several steps that will consolidate his position as the new regime leader.

His actions to date have been capped by a meeting with Soviet leaders in Moscow, which both sides have been eager to represent as a success. Dubcek's quick trip to the USSR on 29-30 January, during which he was un-

accompanied by any other Czechoslovak official, gave both sides a chance to size up the other and to go into Dubcek's plans for changes in the country's domestic policies. The Soviets may have been somewhat reassured, but must still look on Dubcek's liberalizing experiments with apprehension.

Prague's unusually effusive description of the talks was

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lacking in specifics, but stated that "a full accord of views on all questions discussed" was reached in "an atmosphere of cordial friendship, sincerity, and friendly understanding." The two parties were said to have "exchanged views" on foreign policy questions and the problems of international Communism.

Certain specific problems in bilateral relations probably were set aside for another time and for lower level officials to deal with. On the same day that Dubcek arrived in Moscow, for example, a Soviet delegation wound up nine days of talks in Prague on the question of pricing policy, long a source of friction that has interfered with trade between both states.

Having received at least the tacit acceptance of Soviet leaders, Dubcek probably returned home with confidence in his plans to set Czechoslovakia on a new course and to broaden his base of political support. To mollify critical intellectuals prior to his Moscow trip, he already had allowed the Czechoslovak Writers' Union to elect its own liberal leadership. He has also permitted the union to publish a new weekly journal to replace the one taken away from the union by former party boss Novotny.

While heartened, the intellectuals have not completely re-

laxed their suspicious attitudes. In contrast to their bitter opposition to Novotny, however, they view Dubcek's election as "the beginning of a process inside the party and society in which writers want to take part."

On 23 January, one of Dubcek's trusted colleagues, Vasil Bilak, was elected to succeed him as first secretary of the Slovak Communist Party. The two apparently achieved a good working relationship while running the Slovak party between 1962 and 1967. The election of Bilak, a Ukrainian, continues the trend started by Dubcek of elevating representatives of national minorities into positions of power. Dubcek, himself a member of the Slovak minority, had already appointed a man of gypsy origin to the party presidium.

These initial changes seem to be having their desired effect. It has been reported, for example, that younger, progressive elements in Czechoslovak society are optimistic that Dubcek's election will result in a genuine break with the past. Whether their optimism is justified or not, their rising expectations that the party's dead hand will be lifted from domestic affairs will generate additional pressure in that direction.

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